

### Brittney Ray-Crowell Spotlight

We spoke with PhD (Poetry) candidate Brittney Ray-Crowell about her experiences teaching creative writing to middle-schoolers. Here are some of the highlights from an enlightening conversation. Dive in!



Brittney Ray-Crowell

**What exactly does your position entail?**

I am the 7th and 8th grade creative writing magnet teacher at Pershing Middle School. I create the writing activities and assignments for the course in addition to holding auditions for entrance into the program.

**How has your (writing, personal, educational) experience influenced your teaching?**

I've been writing since I was seven years old. In the summer I would attend a young writers' program that I eventually co-directed. I grew up watching my mother fill up journal after journal, so writing became a natural occurrence for me in terms of creating my own kind of unofficial writing community. I think this has influenced my approach towards teaching my students that writing is both a personal and communal experience. I encourage students to take a notebook or at least have google docs on their phone so they can write anytime, anywhere. When we share in class, it's understood that this is a safe space where all forms and voices are welcome. Also, I think I've always liked gaining inspiration through creative writing exercises, so that has definitely filtered its way into the classroom. Anything can spur on into a writing activity. We recently created poems in the form of Craigslist ads (the ones where people are in search of a person or particular item).

**Where does creative writing and creative performance intersect in the classroom?**

I think the intersection lies in the process of exploration. Writing is a performance in and of itself – the arrangement and enacting of pathos, perspective, and speculation on the page. Students write towards how they want their words to manifest, whether that is a particular image,

sonic quality, metaphor, etc. In actually performing what they've written, whether they are reading it for the purpose of actually performing for an audience or just in feeling how the words sound out of their head and in the world, they are able to see if what they have written feels close to their initial motivation. If the performance doesn't feel true, it will guide their writing again through revision. It ties back to learning to play with language and trying different techniques.

**What is your proudest classroom accomplishment?**

I'm proud of the students that find their niche within the craft, especially when they first come to me uncertain of their writing skills. Somewhere along the line we've been taught to believe that all writers follow a certain archetype. They look like this, and write about these things, and have been published in these particular places. I'm most proud when they understand that they are writers just by participating in the craft, that their vision, and interpretation of their experiences and the world are enough without anyone's set criteria or validation. Most of all, they really create some fantastic work. They trust my crazy process and ideas and come up with the loveliest things. It's beautiful when I call home to a parent and read them what their child wrote in class. It's fulfilling witnessing the boundlessness of their potential and how polished, poignant work can come from those that have been in the world for only so long.

**Classroom fun/exciting/horror story?**

There's always a good balance of fun and horror in the classroom, especially with middle school students. One of my favorite moments from years ago was with my former co-teacher Jay Lohse, who recently passed away. He and I had the kids write history raps based on integral figures in black history. We had a lot of fun that day and I'm sure the kids still remember the lesson to this day. I think we forget that music, particularly hip hop is well within the realm of creative writing. More recently, we just received two new typewriters for the kids to do little poetry busking sessions at different school events just like the writers for Inprint. They were so excited when we opened the boxes. You'd have thought we were unearthing some primitive, ancient alien contraption. Seeing their little faces in pure fascination over a new potential for writing was so precious. As far as horror stories go, I've been amazed with how dark little kids can be. I usually tell them there are no limits for what they can write, but a few times I've had to pull them back in from the deep like, "Hey, ok there. That's enough maiming and mayhem for today."

**How can the UHCWP further support students at the K-12 level?**

Students really enjoy learning from different writers. Last year we had the pleasure of having Grace Wagner come in and do some writing activities with the kids. I'd previously given them one of her poems to annotate and study in terms of form and technique and when she showed up, they were starstruck. Visiting and workshoping with the students not only exposes them to the wide range of voices in writing, but it also makes becoming a writer seem like much more of an accessible goal. I'd love to see more writers come in to share their perspectives on writing, their favorite books, or even their own personal challenges with the craft. We'd be happy to have you all.

Should you have queries or wish to support the cwp: [cwp@uh.edu](mailto:cwp@uh.edu)